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Rebel leader doubts execution pictures printed in Newsweek

By George Archibald
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Doubts continue to be expressed about pictures published last week in Newsweek magazine of a purported jungle execution of an alleged Sandinista informant by commandos of the Nicaraguan resistance.

Adolfo Calero, leader of Free Democratic Nicaragua — the largest of the resistance organizations — has denied any knowledge of the incident, which, according to Newsweek, was witnessed Jan. 7 by freelance photographer Frank Wohl, a 21-year-old Northwestern University senior.

Mr. Calero called the killing an apparent set-up by communist Sandinista forces. He said Mr. Wohl had complained to FDN officials after traveling with resistance forces in Nicaragua from June to October last year that he had not seen any combat or other exciting action.

"We are investigating it," said the FDN leader. "Whatever comes out of it, we will find out the truth."

Time magazine rejected Mr. Wohl's pictures April 18, said Managing Editor Ray Cave. "We were concerned about the bona fides" of the photographer, Mr. Cave explained.

Mr. Wohl's photographic agency, Sygma, told Time April 17 that it was the first publication to be offered the pictures, but would allow the magazine only until 11 a.m. the next day to make a decision, said Mr. Cave.

Time was not told that Mr. Wohl had offered the pictures two days earlier to U.S. News and World Report, Mr. Cave said.

U.S. News would not accept the pictures until the magazine's Latin American editor could go to Nicaragua to verify the incident, Mr. Wohl disclosed in an interview.

There were no other witnesses of the reported knifing death of the unidentified reputed Sandinista spy and U.S. News wanted "independent verification" of the incident, said magazine spokeswoman Kathryn Bushkin.

A U.S. News photo editor advised him he would "make a lot of money."

if he sold the pictures to Time or Newsweek for publication before Congress voted on President Reagan's proposed \$14 million aid package to the Nicaraguan resistance, Mr. Wohl told The Washington Times.

U.S. News had offered \$1,500 for 32 color slides of the killing, he disclosed.

"We were intrigued why they [the pictures] were being offered at that critical time — right before the vote," said Time's Mr. Cave.

"I was not sufficiently satisfied [with the authenticity of the photographs] to go ahead with them," he said.

Newsweek was offered the pictures April 18 and reportedly paid \$15,000 for them, according to a trade source. The magazine published four of the pictures in its April 29 issue.

Both Mr. Wohl and Sygma refused to confirm or deny Newsweek's reported purchase price.

No one from the FDN, Nicaragua's Sandinista regime, or the barrio of Balsamo in Madriz province, where the execution reportedly occurred, has reported "such an event ever taking place," said the FDN's Mr. Calero in a telephone interview Friday from Miami.

"This thing that took place in January, three months ago, there has been absolutely no mention made of it," he said.

Mr. Calero visited Northwestern for a lecture April 10 at the invitation of a student group headed by Mr. Wohl. However, Mr. Wohl, who claimed to have hosted Mr. Calero at his apartment for a press conference, told him nothing about the purported FDN execution or the pictures, Mr. Calero reported.

"I did not talk to him at all, I did not see him," Mr. Calero said.

"We would certainly have heard of this [the reported FDN execution] had it really happened," he said. "The Sandinista human rights people who investigate would have been on top of us with his [the victim's] name, with everything. We have not been accused of it, on the one hand, and our people haven't told us about it on the other."

Mr. Calero said he suspects "that this whole thing has been set up."

The photographs are suspicious, he said, because:

- The victim was not blindfolded or gagged, even though 20 Sandinista troops were reported by Newsweek to have been within sight of the execution party. "In the mountain, you can hear a scream kilometers away," he said.

- The light-blue FDN uniforms worn by the executioners have not been issued for the past six months and looked too new and clean to have been worn in the jungle.

- The two men who reportedly knifed the victim to death "had no ammo pouch, no canteen, no nothing" on their belts, even though FDN commandos "wear their gear practically to sleep." They also did not have the belt straps issued to FDN soldiers.

- Mr. Wohl said he knew the names of only two of 60 FDN people at the base camp where the killing reportedly occurred — Comandante Sergio, who did not go with the five-man execution party, and a man named Chino, who he said helped kill the victim. "Anyone whose eyes are a little slanted, they call him Chino," Mr. Calero said.

Mr. Calero is trying to protect himself, Mr. Wohl responded.

"They're taking the wrong approach. You can't prove something that is authentic to be fake, so they shouldn't even be trying to," he said.

FDN field commanders in Honduras are not told everything that happens in the field in Nicaragua, he said. Perhaps the victim's grave has not been discovered because The Times was the first publication to report its location last Thursday, he said.

Members of the FDN execution party had just washed their uniforms and left their gear at camp before they made the 15-minute hike up the mountain to kill the reputed informant, Mr. Wohl explained.

He said the Sandinista group was not sighted during the incident, as Newsweek reported, but was assaulted by the FDN at a church in Balsamo before the execution.

The victim's grave, which he was forced to dig before he was killed, is located on a jungle mountainside about 1.6 miles from the left side of the church, Mr. Wohl said. He did not have a compass to pinpoint the direction, he explained.

Asked if he could find the grave, Mr. Wohl said: "I think I could. It would probably take me a week, but I'd find it."